

3-31-2000

# Hwang, Yooyeun Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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## Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Bouwens, Tom, "Hwang, Yooyeun Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (2000). *Class Projects*. Paper 79.  
[http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class\\_projects/79](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/79)

**Published in:** *History 201 Oral History Interviews (2000) (immigrant residents of Holland) (H98-1351)*, March 31, 2000. Copyright © 2000 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Oral History Interview  
Michigan History – Spring 2000  
Interviewee: Yooyeun Hwang  
Interviewer: Tom Bouwens  
31 March 2000

YH: Date of birth is [date removed], 1960. Place of birth is Seoul, Korea. Immigrated from Seoul, Korea. Immigration date is 1985, December 3rd. Current address is [address removed] Road, Holland, Michigan. My current employment is I am teaching at Hope College.

TB: You already told me what part of Korea you're from.

YH: Seoul.

TB: Can you describe your homeland and what it was like to live there?

YH: It was pretty normal in an American sense. I am from Seoul, which is a big city. And I from between middle and upper-middle class, so I don't think it has anything significantly different from American life. We just have pretty Westernized household and kids go to Westernized schools. It's not, I don't know. Is that enough?

TB: Can you tell me why you came to the United States?

YH: That's kind of an interesting story. My two sisters were in America going school and I wasn't going to come, but my brother was going to come and my father thought well why don't you go and kind of look around. So that is why I said it was not like a typical immigration. I came here kind of playful seven months a look around. That why my reason/purpose came to America. My brother enrolled in school and my two sisters were in universities here. So I was already graduated from college then. I came here and I loved it. It was in Santa Barbara, California. I don't know have you been there?

TB: No, I have not.

YH: It's a beautiful city, campus. Looks so relaxed I decide may I should go to graduate

school, so that's why I stayed. I came here with an immigrant visa, so it was a legal immigration. I came here to kind of have fun for seven months and was going to go back, and stayed. Anyways I got into graduate school.

TB: So getting into graduate school is why you decided to stay?

YH: Yes.

TB: What concerns did you have when you left Korea about coming to the United States?

YH: The moment when I left I felt it was just going to be seven month's trip, so I didn't have any concerns. Once I decide to stay I kind of realized, "Gee I kind of left home without preparing or saying real proper goodbye to people." Sometimes even now I don't know why I am staying here, but at the same time I don't know if I can readjust going back. At home things are different now. I'm in schooling here, so if I can get a job like I have here that is more my concern.

TB: How did you to the US?

YH: By airplane. Because some people came here by boat I guess. By walk.

TB: Who did you travel here with?

YH: My brother.

TB: How many family members have come here to the United States? How many people from your family live here now?

YH: Since this is going to be recorded... Oh we're in the USA. My parents were divorced when I was young. My mom was here already. That's is why I could have come here legally as an immigrant. My two sisters, my brother, and myself came. Four of us. As all student. My brother and eldest sister went back and they are leaving Korea now after

they are done with school. Myself and my little sister stayed. My mom is in California.

TB: Your dad is in Korea still?

YH: Yes. Still Korea.

TB: Why did you choose to come to the United States over say Canada or somewhere in Europe?

YH: I didn't really choose. I came here since my two sisters are here. The reason I stayed and went to graduate school is probably no-one will deny that America has the best graduate schools in the world. The research and everything is leading edge. It's exciting. That's why I stayed.

TB: Why did you come to Holland?

YH: This is a long story. It can be shorter story too.

TB: You can tell the long story.

YH: When you graduate you apply for job. You really don't have choices. You have to apply job and wherever they want me to come I have to go. It's not like I am so famous I can choose any university to go. This is the only school that actually want me to come. It sound pathetic, but it is a true story.

TB: What were your first impressions of Holland?

YH: Can I be honest?

TB: Yes. Be honest that's what he wants.

YH: It was shocking. It was cultural shock. I am from Seoul, which is a pretty liberal city. We don't have too much racial diversity because Koreans, we believe in homogeneous race. Still there are a lot of foreigners. A lot of things are going on. I lived in California

for four years. California you know a lot of things are going on. Then I got my Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Madison is a pretty progressive city. There are a lot of things going on. I came here and it was a little bit shocking. It was just very different. Not many things are going on. Everything is closed on Sunday. I am a Catholic. It seems that not very many people are very accepting of Catholics here. Those were pretty shocking.

TB: Could you describe some of the problems you faced adjusting to life in the United States?

YH: It is just subtle, but I know there are racism here. Not as much as against African-Americans or Hispanic-Americans, but there are racism here. I sense that here and there. That is the hardest part. People have stereotypes and prejudice against Asian women. Sometimes people verbalize and make sure I know that. Make sure that I am aware that I am a foreigner and I speak not perfect English. That part I find a little bit difficult. I've met a lot of nice people. I just don't want to generalize it was a negative experience. Good people become really good friends. There are some nasty people, which I chose to ignore.

TB: What aspects of life here are different from your hometown in Korea? Seoul?

YH: As I mentioned not much things are going on in Holland. Koreans are conservative in different ways.

TB: How is it different?

YH: Traditionally Koreans, they are how do you say. When I grew up, on TV we weren't even allowed to see kiss scenes. It is just that things like this are... what is the word?

TB: They are just really conservative?

YH: Don't show emotions or private things. That would be conservative. Religion part is a major difference. People from Seoul are more accepting of different religions and understand each other. In Holland... I'm not generalizing, it's true for every American. Holland I don't think it's true. People are more conservative Protestant Christians. The mannerism is different not always. It's funny, this almost my thirteenth/fourteenth year in America. I found a lot about Americans just like Korean. There are people I feel comfortable just like Korean. There are nice people just comfortable. There are some very extreme people that probably there are similar people in Korea too that I didn't meet. I don't want to say that we have different people. There is some diversity in this group. I happen to meet good people and bad people. I'm sure there are good people and bad people in Korea.

TB: When you came here did you know many people right away?

YH: I started to take English from seventh grade, so I could read and write. Still I have trouble speaking fluently. Especially when I am tired it's worse. In the beginning, I couldn't speak at all. It is hard to make friends if you cannot speak English fluently. I don't know if this is true for any country but especially Americans are not patient with people who cannot speak English very well. I was very insecure. Maybe other people are not very patient and I was very insecure. It just kind of prevents from making friends in the beginning. Now I have good friends.

TB: Did you have the same thing when you came to Holland? Did you have a hard time or was it easier meeting people here?

YH: I'm not saying this because you are a Hope student. I've found Hope students are

wonderful. I didn't have any hard times being close to students. I've had good times with the students. I've had a wonderful time teaching here. I've made good friend in the department. I didn't really have negative experiences in the college. Holland city, I've had some bad experiences. One thing I'll never forget. One time I had to call someone to get some directions. An old man answered the phone. I was asking questions and he said, "Young lady, I don't speak Spanish." and hung up the phone. I was like "Oh my gosh." That was the hardest part. Sometimes in the store I can notice that people are not comfortable that I am not a white American. Things like that.

TB: Where were you first employed in America?

YH: I never really worked outside of college. I did my field placement when I was in Masters program at Santa Barbara. It was a university children's center. It was like a preschool, but belongs to the university. That was the first time that I worked in America. In Ph.D. program I was a research assistant and teaching assistant.

TB: Was it difficult to find jobs for you?

YH: It was not actually. The preschool jobs was easy, because it was part of field placement. Then they just wanted me to stay and work. Since I didn't try and outside of school job, I am not sure. When I find my research job and teaching job, people were wonderful when I was in the Ph.D. program. They was just being supportive. Maybe I am not giving you a fair picture of what is happening to other immigrants.

TB: Well everyone is different, and part of what they want to see is how everyone has different stories coming here. How did you moving here effect your family?

YH: To Holland or America?

TB: Both.

YH: It made my father really sad. He thought I was just going to stay just seven months and maybe get a job or get married or something like that. He was a little bit disappointed. It made him a little bit lonely. He is very proud of me doing well in America with my second language. I lost some friends because I moved. In the beginning I wrote them and tried to talk to them. It is harder it is now thirteen, fourteen years. I lost some good friends.

TB: Do you see your dad?

YH: I see him every year.

TB: Do you go home?

YH: My dad usually comes here or I go home.

TB: What about your Mom? How did moving to Holland effect your family in California?

YH: Holland really didn't affect her too much. When I decided to go into Ph.D. program in Wisconsin she kind of was shocked. She wished I could go somewhere in California so I could stay around her. I decided to go to Wisconsin. Wisconsin has an excellent education program. It was one of the top, and I didn't want to give up because I knew the professor there. I knew a professor there. Then she was really disappointed that I'm leaving. She was sad. Now she's OK. She's very proud of me.

TB: Do you get to see her very often?

YH: At least twice a year. Last Christmas she was here and sometimes I go there in California.

TB: How about your brothers and sisters?



YH: My brother and sister in Korea they come here to see me or I go there just like my dad. My little sister is teaching at Bloomington, Illinois. She has a Ph.D. too. We each other quite often. My sister got her Ph.D. from U of M. When I was in Madison she was in U of M, so we kind of meet each other back and forth.

TB: That was nice.

YH: Yeah, it was nice.

TB: What tradition did you bring with you over to the United States that you use today?

YH: For an object I don't know of anything. I don't remember anything. I was kind of packed for traveling, so I brought some of my clothes and books, things like that. It's not tradition, but I studied Chinese calligraphy when I was in college. It was kind of like a hobby club and I was the president of the club. I brought this... have you seen that?

TB: No.

YH: Chinese calligraphy brushes. You use a stone and then you grind the black stones. I had those and brought it here. I never used it after I brought it. I have that. That's kind of part of my traditions. You think I'm weird?

TB: No. I don't think you are weird. What were some of the most difficult adjustments for you to make?

YH: Here?

TB: Yeah, US.

YH: I think being a foreigner forever. I don't have any major problems, but being lonely. I'm alone here and I'm being a foreigner. And language seems like it takes forever. I know it's getting better, but it's the most difficult part.

TB: Overall how difficult was your transition to the Holland community?

YH: If I choose to ignore it, it's not that difficult. If I think about like when people are not nice, then it bothers me. I have been so busy I've chose to ignore those. They didn't bother me that much then.

TB: Do you have any other examples of stories like the direction one?

YH: Yeah. Here and there. The other day, I became an American citizen, last year. I had to get an American passport. I went to City Hall. I was sitting and there was a high school student and mother. They were getting a passport to go abroad. This is a Caucasian mother and daughter. I was sitting there and there was another Southeast Asian man, either Cambodian or Vietnamese, walking in. He was asking the clerk about something and had a really strong accent, a Southeast Asian accent. He apparently knows this mother. He says hi and she says hi. He walked out. She started mocking his accent right before her high school daughter. Suddenly it becomes really uncomfortable. I had to talk to this clerk before her. I became really conscious after I talk, so she doesn't mock my accent. That kind of made me uncomfortable. That is another example.

TB: Is their racism between Asian people? like between different Asian groups or not?

YH: Oh, Yes. Yeah.

TB: Do you experience that here with other Asian groups in the United States or not really?

YH: I don't really have contact. If I had a lot of contact I sure there will be. In any human group there is racism and prejudice I believe. I don't know if you agree or disagree?

TB: It seems like there defiantly is. No matter how hard we try.

YH: It is getting better. That's what I'm teaching, Encounter with the Cultures class. We are

talking about racism and it is everywhere. It doesn't mean it is O.K. I'm not saying racism is everywhere so it is O.K. We're trying to make it better. America is not the worst place. There are a lot of racisms here, but you know it is not the worst place.

TB: Why have you stayed in Holland?

YH: Because I don't have a choice. Just kidding. What could I have done? This is my job. Unless I try other jobs. As I said I love the college and I like the students. I have a good time. It is not like its urging me to find another job.

TB: How long have you been at Hope?

YH: This is my fourth year.

TB: In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

YH: I don't know. I go to church every Sunday.

TB: Where do you go?

YH: St. Francis de Salles. Because of my research I go to school, middle school or high school. That is all I guess. I'm not really social person. I'm pretty shy. I have been busy, so I just stay at work.

TB: The next question is do you have a church affiliation. We already talked about that. What influenced your decision to attend St. Francis de Salles?

YH: Catholics don't really have choices. Either Our Lady of Lake or St. Francis. I go to St. Francis every Sunday, but if I get up late then I go Our Lady of Lake. There mass is thirty minutes later than St. Francis.

TB: At home back in Korea you said people where more accepting of different religions. What other religions were there and were your parents both Catholics? Is that why you

became Catholic?

YH: I actually grew up as a Presbyterian. This is top secret. Don't type this. Anyway, I convert to Catholic when I was in college. I went to Catholic school. Confucianism is not religion, but was strong influence in Korea. We have \_\_\_\_\_ for ancestors and things like that. It's Confucianism's influence. Buddhist is the second strong religion. We get a lot of Buddhists. Third is, I think, Catholic and Protestant churches. I know about twenty percent of Koreans either Catholics or Protestant.

TB: Everyone is pretty accepting of that at home?

YH: Yeah. Especially Buddhists and Catholics get along very well.

TB: Increasingly Holland is becoming more culturally diverse. When you see newer immigrants settling in Holland how do you feel?

YH: I like it. I think it is good. I live in Holland Heights area. I see lot of Caucasians, Hispanic people, and Southeast Asian. There are not many Chinese or Koreans or Japanese here, but there is some. It make me feel more comfortable. If its like only white people here and I am lone Asian, I think it would be very awkward for me, uncomfortable. There is some other people that makes me more comfortable.

TB: How do you feel about the Hispanic community here in Holland?

YH: I think it's misrepresented. People have such negative ideas about Hispanics. I see them every Sunday and they are nice people. In any group of people there are some poor people or unethical people or there are some bad people, but overall I think it's just like other racial groups. They are nice people, I think. I have a very positive feeling toward them.

TB: What are your feelings about the Dutch community here?

YH: There is a little secret I have to tell. My sister married a Dutch immigrant man, who is from Holland, so my nephew is half Dutch and half Korean. I have to love Dutch I guess. I'm just joking. Anyway, that is a true story though. I like that the Dutch people in here has very strong pride about their own cultures. That they kept coming to the United States. There are things I think is very nice and I appreciate. There are part, not everyone, but there some Dutch Americans here very close minded or not accepting. That I think is not really good. I don't want to generalize the negative part for everything they did positively.

TB: What are your feelings about the Asian community here? How is the Asian community here in Holland? How big is it? and what are your feelings about it?

YH: There are huge Southeast Asian groups. They are refugees from Indo-China, that area like Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. I don't really have contact them, but I'm teaching their history here, the experience of being refugees, as I have great sympathy toward them. Honestly I didn't know their cultures that well. People assume that because I'm I know the Southeast Asian cultures, but that's not true. Japanese friend and I recently discovered things that I didn't know. I'm learning things, and sometimes I feel bad that some people don't treat Southeast Asian nicely. It shouldn't happen that way.

TB: How big is the Korean and Japanese community?

YH: Here.

TB: Yeah.

YH: Korean, I'm not sure, but probably around twenty all-together. Japanese including

exchange students maybe twenty/thirty. I may be wrong. Southeast Asian I think several thousand. It's a huger community.

TB: Do you see new immigrants to the area seeing similar problems that you had coming to the area?

YH: They're probably different, because I came here as a student and stayed in academia. In the university setting, people are more understanding and accepting. If they came as refugees or just immigrants and just trying to find a job probably that's a lot more difficult. That was your question?

TB: Yeah. How do you feel about the Dutch heritage Holland has tried to preserve?

YH: I think it's a good idea. I think any ethnic groups have to have pride. We talked about that in class today. You have to love yourself first to love others. If you pride about your cultures and appreciate it, and you learn that other people can do that too and you accept that, I think it's good. I like. It's unique kind of. Has a character.

TB: Can you describe your feelings about Tulip Time?

YH: I like it. I don't know it's kind of fun. Some people complain about traffics, but that's once a year. What is big deal? I like it.

TB: What are your feelings about the Cinco de Mayo Festival?

YH: I didn't even know there is one. Have to advertise more I guess. If I knew I would go and watch it. There is one, is it true?

TB: I guess so, I didn't really realize it. I grew up in Zeeland my whole life and I didn't realize there was one either.

YH: So you must be Dutch too?

TB: Yeah. Do you feel the community celebrates your heritage well?

YH: Korean?

TB: Yeah.

YH: In a way yes. That sounds weird, but there are a lot of Korean children adopted in the Holland and Zeeland area. I know during the Tulip Festival there is a kind of parade of Korean dances and things like that. Some Reformed Churches have, like, Korean dance concert. In a way they celebrate Korean culture. I guess. It was surprising for me. That's another point I didn't make before. Since there's a lot of Korean children adopted in heres, a lot of people assume that I'm adopted or make comments about it. I don't find that very polite, sometimes.

TB: I understand that. Is your community well represented?

YH: Yeah. Not really.

TB: I think we already answered that. The next question is have you experience any discrimination in Holland? You already mentioned two things. Do you have any other stories you'd like to share?

YH: Maybe I'm oversensitive or I didn't perceive right. When I go hair dressers, I met a lot of nice ones so I don't want to generalize it, but some female hair dressers never seen foreigners or especially Asians. They haven't done any Asian's hair, and they're pretty mean. They don't talk to me or they cut hair in two minutes. That make me really upset. I don't want to argue or fight with the hair dresser. That's not me. I just walked away, but that's kinda of very upsetting experience for me.

TB: You don't have any children yet so the next question is not going to apply.

YH: Never married.

TB: What would you say to a friend who was considering moving to the United States? A friend from home?

YH: United States. Depends on what they want to do. I think America is exciting place. There is amazing diversity that we don't have in Korea and a lot of research is going on. There are a lot of opportunities if you fight for that. It is exciting place and is really different world. At the same time there is a lot of discrimination, challenges in there. If you are ready for that I guess, you have to suffer that part. It's give and take. What else? I don't know? That's all I'd say?

TB: Do you have anything else you want to say?

YH: What do you think about foreigners coming into Holland? Since you have been living here for all your life.

TB: It's interesting. At first there was hardly any foreigners here, then it was kind of a big deal I you saw someone that was different. Now it seems like everyone is more accepting, it's a lot more normal and easy. At first when you see one person out of a hundred it's unusual, but when it gets to be two, three, four, five then it makes it so people are kind of more open. The more people that come the more it makes it easier for the people that come.

YH: Is it OK? Do you feel it is threatening that a lot of non-Dutch people come? or doesn't matter for you?

TB: Doesn't matter.

YH: Where are you going to graduate school?



TB: University of Michigan.

YH: That's wonderful. My sister went there. That's it then?

TB: What were the main reasons you stayed besides graduate school? What else did you like?

What about America when you came? What were some of the big drawing things?

YH: Some people don't like diversity, but was most attractive part for me, the diversity.

Growing up in South Korea, I thought North Koreans have red skin, all evils, communists are scary people, or that all these misconceptions about different people. I came here and I meet people from China, supposed to be communists, and South Korea said no, no don't talk to them. But I came here and it was just wonderful to meet them and talk about them. People from Africa, South America, North America, and Europe talk to them and learn their cultures. That was just exciting to me. You don't get that in Korea. You get to see lot of Koreans. I think that was most attractive part for me. And then research, leading edge research.

TB: Did you have any contact with North Koreans before you came over here?

YH: NO. NO. If I made contact it's illegal first of all and there are a lot of consequences to suffer.

TB: Are there any North Koreans in the United States?

YH: There are none. There are original North Koreans that came a long time ago. No, No. Anything else?

TB: Not that I can think of, no.

YH: Do you think it's enough to make your paper?

TB: Yeah. It's good. Thank you. I appreciate it.

YH: Yeah. I hope you learned something.

TB: Yeah.

YH: Any other questions? You can stop now, I guess.

TB: Unless I can think of another question.

YH: Can I ask you something? You are a younger generation Dutch American. Do you think younger Dutch Americans in Holland are more accepting than older Dutch Americans?

TB: Definitely.

YH: You think so? Can you kind of elaborate or explain examples.

TB: You talk to older people in church or no matter where you go it seems like they are quicker to use racist words or terms. You don't hear it from the younger. If a younger person hears it, like if I hear something like it I'm offended by it. But if the older generation says it they don't offend one another nearly as quickly. Have you found that yourself? People are more accepting at the college, like the students are more accepting than faculty and higher ups and people like that?

YH: That's not what I heard, but that's I found as a personal experience. I honestly have never. Maybe some ruder students, but they just rude not racist. I didn't have any negative experience students being racist toward me, because I'm foreigner and minority. Some faculty actually make some ignorant comments. I know they didn't mean to, but sounds very prejudiced. I think that's true.

TB: What kind of things did they say?

YH: For example, just joke. One faculty member we were just talking casually about something and he said, you are from a country that people are not assertive. So I was

like, how do you know? Do you think you know about my culture more than I do. So I said, Do think so? And he said, I know so. I was like O.K. Or I was eating sandwich and many people sitting around and one faculty member turned around and said why don't you use chopstick. I was like we are eating sandwich right now. It was just supposed to be joke, but I didn't find it funny. Is that good?

TB: Yes. Thank you very much.